

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – Bob Munshaw

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

This morning, I'd like to start with a question. What does it look like to follow Jesus? Let me make it a little more personal. What does it look like in your life that you are a follower of Jesus? ... Really, what does it look like? If you are a Christian, what difference does it make in your life that you are a follower of Jesus?

There is a lot in our passages this morning that focuses on following. You have Elisha tailing Elijah, and Elijah trying to lose him—playing little games with him. But like Christina last week, I am not going to spend time with the Elijah story this morning, except to say that because he persevered, we read that Elisha received a double share of Elijah's spirit ... and became both a great prophet and a servant for the people of Israel at a dark time in their history.

In our gospel reading, we have Jesus heading for Jerusalem with his disciples. They obviously still do not understand the crux of Jesus' message. When some Samaritans did not welcome them, their response is to ask Jesus if they can call down fire from heaven on them. (Some of the ancient manuscripts of Luke's gospel say that they wanted to call down fire from heaven just as Elijah did in his confrontation with the prophets of Baal.)

Luke 9 is a long and busy chapter. It begins with the twelve being sent out and preaching and performing all sorts of miracles. That story is followed by the feeding of the 5000, and then Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. We also have, in Luke 12, two occasions where Jesus predicts his death, the casting out of a demon from a boy—after his disciples failed in trying to cast it out—and finally our reading for today. I'm not sure how much total time passes in Luke 9, but it is clear to see that, apart from this failing with the demon, the disciples are on a bit of a roll. They are coming into our story from a position of excitement and success. They have witnessed the miraculous. They are participating in the miraculous. They are on top of the world, and you can almost see their disgust, if you can just picture it. "You miserable, corrupt Samaritans. You are not pure Jews. You don't worship God right. Your Scriptures are wrong. You don't sacrifice at the real temple in Jerusalem ... and you have the gall to reject Jesus?!? You deserve only to burn!!"

The disciples have totally misread the situation—and we read that Jesus turns and rebukes them.

What does it look like to follow Jesus? In the second half of our gospel passage, we have these people who say that they want to follow Jesus, but they have excuses about why they can't do it yet. I'm not totally sure what is going on here. Is Jesus testing their resolve? Is he saying something like, "You talk a good game, but let's see your actions"? We know that Jesus called people to follow him—and many did. But following Jesus for the disciples meant going all in. It meant walking away from their old lives as fishermen, tax collectors, the things that they knew, their families and lives, and being transformed

into people who were serving Jesus and others. That is what the disciples of a rabbi did. They completely followed in the way of the rabbi, learning and following the rabbi's teachings.

What would you say that the very crux of Jesus' teaching was? ... What was the greatest commandment? What did he tell the disciples that the new commandment that he gave them was? And yes, it took the disciples time to really get it—just like it sometimes takes us some time to get it in our comfortable American culture, where we have sometimes become the persecutors, like James and John wanted to be, instead of learning that, like Jesus, we are called to love and serve.

The text I really want to pay attention this morning is our reading from Galatians, a very familiar text about the fruit of the Spirit, and we will turn to the text in just a couple minutes. But before we do, I'd like to begin by talking about the Free Methodist Church of yesterday and today. As I read the news and look at my Facebook feed, sometimes it just seems like the church, and the Christianity that I was raised with, are under siege. I was told that some things were wrong and some things were right, and now those values are challenged, and I'm not always sure what to do about that. Maybe you are not sure, either. For example, as a teen, it was clear to me that Christians did not drink. They did not go to dances. PG-13 movies were iffy. In fact, for awhile going to a movie theatre at all was iffy, and maybe a sin. Issues of human sexuality were not even on the radar for me as a 15-year-old in Moose-Jaw. I just knew that anything past second base, whatever exactly second base was, clearly was a sin. So, I understand that Christina's message last week challenged some of us to wrestle, or continue to wrestle, with interpretations of Scripture that we were not raised with. I'm honestly not sure what to think and do as I seek to follow Jesus faithfully ... on a number of issues, though it is helpful for me to return to Jesus' commandment to start with love.

A hundred years ago, Free Methodists felt under siege with new ideas that were challenging their faith. The world those Christians of the early 20th century were facing was changing rapidly as well. Godless evolution was gaining traction as the primary theory of our origins. The Bible was under attack. This included attacks on the miracles of Jesus, the resurrection, the historical truths of the Old Testament. People were saying that the Bible was not God's word, but just another influential religious book—just one among many from the different world religions.

The response of Free Methodists at the time was interesting. Historian Wayne Kleinsteuber says that these threatened Free Methodists pulled the wagons into a circle to shut out the world and its threats to them and their children. In fear, and seeking to preserve their treasured faith, they focused on rules and regulations to make sure that they stayed on the right path. After all, these were desperate times, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

And so, what did it began to look like to be a Free Methodist? Well, let's look. Kleinsteuber says that the Annual and General Conferences of the church focused a great deal of time and energy on “ferreting out such evidences of depravity as the wearing of

ornamental buttons, ruffles, gold, pearls, feathers, flowers, superfluous ribbons, tinsel, flashy colors, short sleeves, low necked dresses, and hobble skirts.” Oh yes, looking around the room, I can see that a few of you would be severely judged in the Free Methodist Church of 1915.

And there is more: fireworks, games, fairs, circuses, picnics, school athletic activities, and even reading novels were prohibited by good Free Methodists, for “one paragraph (of a novel) may ruin a soul.” (Kleinstauber, 36-37)

We have come a long way since those days! But how do we live out an authentic love for Jesus in the world today, a world filled with brokenness that I have brought upon myself, and brokenness through the things that other people have done and said to me? The apostle Paul has some really important things for us to think about. I think his words to the Galatian churches can be instructive for us today.

Free Methodists gather together every three to four years for General Conference. As you are aware, there are many hard issues that have to be discussed and decided on at our General Conferences. People do not always agree with the decisions of the General Conferences. Many resolutions are made, and the majority are shot down. There are always winners and losers at General Conference. Sometimes, decisions made at one Conference are overturned at later conferences. For example, full ordination of women in the Free Methodist Church was defeated at a General Conference in the 1890s, and shamefully, it took the church almost 100 years to rectify that mistake.

In Acts 15, early leaders in the church met to wrestle with the big issue of the day. You remember this story? The first Gentile converts were entering the church. Before this time, all the Christians had been Jewish converts. As Jews, they followed much of the Jewish law, the Torah. Many of them also continued to worship in the temple and to meet in the synagogues, and all of them had been circumcised. So, the issue: did these new Christians also need to be circumcised and follow the law? Feelings were strong, and both sides felt like they were right. After much debate ... and pulling out of hair ... and hand wringing, they finally decided that these Gentile Christians did not have to follow the law or be circumcised. But notice that these Christians were seeking to interpret what it looked like to follow Jesus ... and they did not always agree, and they did not always get it right, even as they sought to be faithful followers of Jesus.

But this is hardly the end of the story. As we consider the message of our Scripture text in Galatians, allow me to set the stage for you. Paul wrote this letter, at least in part, because of knuckleheads. A decision had been made in Jerusalem about circumcision, but now in this region of the Roman Empire called Galatia (approximately 600 miles from Jerusalem, in modern day Turkey), circumcision is back on the table.

Now, I want to be clear here. I am not saying that one should never question the decisions of the Church. Churches have been making mistakes for 2000 years. For example, it was only 200 years ago that many Christians, including Methodists, in America were using the Bible to say that slavery in America was completely acceptable.

But back up 2000 years, and you have these knuckleheads who were traveling around with a message that if you really wanted to be a Christian ... if you wanted to be a real Christian ... you had to be circumcised. This issue is the heart of the message of the book of Galatians. Paul wrote the letter (inspired by the Holy Spirit), because he had to deal with knuckleheads. Our Galatians reading this morning is famous ... you have heard it time and again in church, but it follows immediately on Paul speaking sharply about those who were encouraging circumcision and who were encouraging people to live a legalistic, rather than a Spirit-led Christianity.

Galatians is a letter of response to this legalistic righteousness. In a very real way, it offers a snapshot of the type of people we ought to be growing into as we follow the Holy Spirit's leading in our lives. Paul provides a list of the fruit that we should be expecting to see growing in our lives as Christians. What does it look like to be loving and joyful, and patient and kind, and good, and faithful and gentle and self-controlled?

In a sense, this is a picture of what we should be expecting to see in ourselves and in each other as we live as followers of Jesus. I want to speak practically here, just as Paul is speaking very practically. If we are willing to take Paul's teaching here and elsewhere seriously, then the first thing that we should note is that the journey of transformation as we follow Jesus is not a passive one. We've got to be actively involved in the process. If you're looking for one word here, it's intentionality—being intentional. In his letters to those early churches of the first century, the apostle Paul consistently used action words for our part of walking with God. Understand clearly, neither Paul, nor I, are saying that we can do work to earn our salvation. That's a free gift. But Paul is very clear to communicate that walking with God calls for action on our parts. Paul regularly calls Christians to active response to God. For example, throughout Romans 6 Paul says, ***Don't let sin control*** the way you live ... instead ***give yourselves*** to God. ***Be alive*** to God through Christ. He also says in Romans 6 that you have no obligation whatsoever to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. He says that the Christian is not under the law, but under grace, which of course fits nicely with his message in Galatians,

In Romans 12, Paul continues: *I plead with you to **give your bodies** to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice.* And listen again to Paul in Galatians 5: *If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, **let us follow** the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.* Let us follow the Holy Spirit. This is a call for action. We cannot be passive as Christians, period, because a call to be a real disciple of Jesus is a call to serve Him fully; we certainly can't expect real transformation to occur, unless we are willing to go the places where God's Spirit is leading. Again – intentionality! This is a message I need to hear. Too often, I can find myself practically living my life as if God does not exist, or perhaps doing Christian stuff that I am expected to do, but not really letting the Holy Spirit have access to the real me.

This is at least somewhat the trap that the religious elite of Jesus day fell into. And while they were successful in making the outside of themselves look pretty spiritual, they couldn't change themselves from within. Jesus called the religious elite of his day “whitewashed tombs.” They did all the right looking and sounding “churchy” things.

They could pray impressively. They could do a wonderful job of looking very pious and religious ... but what they were inside was the same as anyone living life without God. They were unchanged within, and that's the type of religion that so many Christians are trying ... a little cleaning on the outside, without God transforming the inner spirit ... a lot of looking the right way and saying the right things, but no vibrancy within. Many within the church just have never experienced what it means to truly follow the leadership of the Spirit, or have been distracted from their walk with Jesus. I know I have been guilty of this. I am like the disciples in Luke 9. I'm happy to judge the Samaritans I see around me ... but I have all sorts of excuses about ignoring Jesus' call on my life to be transformed in my heart ... I am often not very obedient to Paul's instruction to keep in step with the Spirit.

So, what does it look like to be a follower of Jesus? I think that it means that I need to be honest that I do not have it all together, and that I do not have all the answers, and that I am a member of a community of believers here at St. Paul's that does not have it all together nor have all the answers. But following Jesus is not just admitting my brokenness, it is also personally and communally seeking to follow the commandment of Jesus to love ... which is not always easy—and also to heed Paul's instruction to listen to and follow the guidance of the Spirit. If we can focus on learning to do these things well, I think we will be a lot closer to being true followers of Jesus.